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# What Would Ozanam Do?<sup>1</sup>

By

DAVID L. GREGORY

## I.

Pray. I am convinced that Blessed Frédéric would pray; above all else, he would pray. This was at the core of Saint Vincent de Paul's advice — "prayer, being your first occupation, your mind may be filled with God for the rest of the day."<sup>2</sup> Blessed Fred, his mind filled with God, manifested his observance of the first great commandment, love of God, by his practice of the second great commandment, love of neighbor. Pray; he would first pray; then, he would act in the classical fashion that Saint Ignatius Loyola urged upon the Jesuits — pray, knowing everything depends on God, and act, as if everything depended on the actor's best efforts. First, Blessed Fred would pray; then, but only then, he would act, working hard, and working smart, just as did Saint Vincent.

## II.

During my research leave in the fall semester, 2004, I immersed myself in the writings of, and about, Blessed Antoine Frédéric Ozanam.<sup>3</sup> Initially, as a professor of labor and employment law with extensive publications on the intersectionality of Catholic social teaching and labor,<sup>4</sup> I was drawn to Ozanam's work on the "natural salary," which set the conceptual

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based on "In Our Times, the Unfinished Work of Frédéric Ozanam," the annual Saint Vincent de Paul lecture I presented by invitation, and in conjunction with Reverend Craig Mousin, at DePaul University on 28 September 2006. This essay was also the basis for a talk I presented to the St. Vincent de Paul Society, Melville, New York, on Saturday, 21 April 2007. The Epilogue, completed 15 August 2009, on the Feast of the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary, reflects developments since the fall of 2006.

I thank Reverend Mousin, University Ombudsperson, and the DePaul University Office of Mission and Values, for their gracious hospitality and camaraderie during my visit, and for the invitation to write this article for publication in *Vincentian Heritage*. I also thank Philip Crotty, Joseph A. Varacalli, and my former Dean, Joseph Bellacosa, for generous comments on prior drafts of my writing about Blessed Frédéric Ozanam.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Vincent de Paul, Conference to the Daughters of Charity, 2 August 1640, *Vincentian Heritage* 17:1 (1996): 4.

<sup>3</sup> One of the very best single sources of synoptic, essential information on Ozanam is the symposium issue of *Vincentian Heritage*, "Honoring the Sesquicentennial of the Founding of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul." *Vincentian Heritage* 17:1 (1996).

<sup>4</sup> See, David L. Gregory, "Catholic Labor Theory and the Transformation of Work," 45 *Washington and Lee Law Review* 119 (1988); David L. Gregory, "Dorothy Day's Lessons for the Transformation of Work," 14 *Hofstra Labor Law Journal* 57 (1996); David L. Gregory, "Dorothy Day, Workers' Rights, and Catholic Authenticity," 26 *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 1371 (1999).

stage a half-century later for Pope Leo XIII's great labor encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. In turn, Monsignor John Ryan's doctoral dissertation at the Catholic University of America's School of Social Work in 1906 was entitled, not coincidentally, the "living wage." Ryan's pioneering work provided the platform for the first federal minimum wage and overtime law, the Fair Labor Standards Act, in 1938.

Now, of course, the contemporary living wage initiative is succeeding in many municipalities throughout the nation, albeit not yet in Chicago. Thus, the intellectual legacy of Blessed Fred threads through more than a century-and-a-half, from mid-nineteenth century Paris to, eventually, even Chicago. With the election results of 8 November 2006 now yielding Democratic majorities in both chambers of the Congress, perhaps even the federal minimum wage, disgracefully anemic at \$5.15 per hour,<sup>5</sup> may finally be raised for the first time in almost a decade. One can readily see Ozanam's natural salary, set by principles of justice and the common good rather than by the supposed neutral hand of the mythic *laissez-faire* market, positively influencing economic justice initiatives for workers today. And, of course, as a Catholic professor at a sister Vincentian university, I was long aware of Ozanam's perhaps even greater notoriety as a founder of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

In what is apparently the first extensive law review article ever written about Ozanam, I explored at some length Ozanam's principal contributions to Catholic social teaching on the rights of workers via his concept of the natural salary, and his exemplary direct practice of the corporal works of mercy — for example, delivering coal and fuel on his back to the desperately poor in the Parisian tenement slums while a teenaged law student. The paper was presented as part of a symposium conference on "The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Good Society" at the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, on 7-9 April 2005, and subsequently published as "Antoine Frédéric Ozanam: Building the Good Society."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> As DePaul University President Reverend Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M., expressly noted in his keynote address to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul: "People are poor because the minimum wage is \$5.15, which doesn't even approach the poverty line. The federal government in 2006 says that one adult and three children living in a household are poor if they live on less than \$20,000. Let's do the math. To make \$20,000 in a full-time job working forty hours a week for all 52 weeks of the year, a person would have to earn \$9.62 an hour." Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M., "The Living Rule" (keynote address, 92<sup>nd</sup> National Meeting of the U.S. Council of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Indianapolis, IN, 31 August 2006). Complete text available online at [www.svdpusa.org](http://www.svdpusa.org).

<sup>6</sup> David L. Gregory, "Antoine Frédéric Ozanam: Building the Good Society," 3 *St. Thomas Law Journal* 21 (2005). The many reference sources to, and by, Ozanam and his work are extensively cited in my law review article.



Frédéric Ozanam as depicted in the foyer entrance mosaic  
of Saint Thomas More Church, St. John's University, Queens, New York.  
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### III.

In the beautiful foyer entrance to the Saint Thomas More Church on the mall of the St. John's University campus in Queens, New York City, and beginning with the inspiration of Saint Vincent, the great constellation of Vincentian luminaries is presented in a gorgeous blend of social, personal action informed by Resurrection themes. When you enter, Ozanam is the third person depicted on the foyer's left side. Head bowed, arm crossing his chest, thin and with long stringy hair, Ozanam seems subdued and humbled, and more than most of the others. Perhaps he knew and appreciated, more than some of the others, exactly whose company he is in — God's company, in the Mystical Body of Christ.

Intellectually brilliant, and a prodigiously smart and hard worker, he would have accomplished nothing were it not for his deeply integrated prayer life. Curiously, in the significant body of writing by and about Ozanam, there is not a great deal of discussion of his interior spiritual life. But, without a doubt, pray he did. His prayer translated into action — bringing fuel to the poor of Paris, teaching students, teaching workers for free in church crypts, engaging in prolific scholarly and essay writing, and networking behind the scenes with everyone from a coterie of Dominican preachers to the Archbishop of Paris.

Thus, in the model of Benedict and Vincent, his prayer and his work were deeply interwoven. He prayed as the Good Samaritan prayed, in a prayer of direct personal action, practicing the corporal works of mercy to the stranger in desperate need.<sup>7</sup> Ozanam's prayer can best be measured through this direct charitable action, not by a series of particular interior exercises.

<sup>7</sup> Above his tomb is a depiction of the parable of the Good Samaritan. See, Shaun McCarty, S.T., "Frederick Ozanam: Lay Evangelizer," *Vincentian Heritage* 17:1 (1996), 10.

For, as Jesus taught, we will ultimately be judged by how we treat Christ in the least amongst us.

Through personal witness and diplomatic personal skills, Ozanam brought workers back to the Church, and, in a decade, turned the masses of workers, formerly hostile to the Church, into faithful Catholics. He turned the wary, suspicious Archbishop of Paris into a friend, and a champion of the workers. One of his instruments for these profound transformations was through his friendships with Dominican preachers, and he successfully persuaded the Archbishop to staff the Cathedral with the Dominicans as principal homilists.

Ozanam's interior prayer and spiritual life was externally directed to the love of neighbor, to the love of the stranger in Christ's image, just as was the spiritual life, implicitly but profoundly, of the Good Samaritan. Ozanam came to realize his own spiritual journey more expressly and profoundly: "I have found that Christianity had been for me... a sphere of ideas, a sphere of worship, but not sufficiently a sphere of morality, of intentions, of actions.... I want to speak of faith!... Religious ideas can have no value if they have not a practical and positive value. Religion serves less to think than to act, and if it teaches to live, it is in order to teach to die. The value of Christianity is in this, and not in the attraction which its dogma may present to men of imagination and of mind."<sup>8</sup>

#### IV.

Now, in the fall of 2006, having prayed, what would Ozanam do to address the plight of workers? On his honeymoon, he met with Pope Gregory XVI, and presented him with a copy of his doctoral dissertation on Dante.<sup>9</sup> Sooner than later, I am sure that Ozanam would find a way to meet with Pope Benedict XVI; and, as a result of their meeting, sooner than later, I am equally sure that Pope Benedict XVI would be publicly preaching the virtues of the living wage, a message sure to be heard even, and most especially, in Chicago. Ozanam would be meeting with Cardinals, Archbishops, and Bishops. He would mobilize every contact and, in classic Vincentian style, leverage political pressure points to achieve the good. Throughout, Ozanam concurrently would be writing influential essays and public opinion pieces in the leading public policy journals, thus bringing multiple pressure points to bear upon decision makers — such as, say, Mayors, and City Aldermen, even, especially, in Chicago.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, quoting from *Letters of Frederic Ozanam*, Ainslie Coates, trans. (New York: Benziger, 1886), 107ff.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory, "Ozanam: Building the Good Society," *St. Thomas Law Journal*, 30.



Portrait. Mid-20th century postcard, with stamp honoring Frédéric  
and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul.  
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Ozanam always did his proverbial homework, especially the necessary work closest to home. He would read what DePaul University President, Reverend Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M., had to say in his keynote address to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul at their annual meeting on 31 August 2006, posted on the Society's website. Citing, *inter alia*, the Rule of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, President Holtschneider emphasizes: "Vincentians seek to draw closer to Christ."<sup>10</sup> Ozanam would also read, on the DePaul University website, that the biography of President Holtschneider states that he is on "Mayor Richard Daley's Chicago 2016 Evaluation Committee, which is preparing a bid to bring the Olympics to Chicago." Hmmm. While there is still plenty of time, there is also not a minute to waste by Ozanam's astute calculations.

No doubt, Blessed Fred would find a way to leverage the President of DePaul to apply the moral suasion of this very well-informed Vincentian priest upon one of the DePaul University College of Law's most prominent alumni, Mayor Richard Daley. If Mayor Daley had not yet read Reverend Holtschneider's keynote address to the Society, Ozanam would, in his indefatigable Vincentian diplomatic style, ensure that the Mayor was thoroughly

<sup>10</sup> Holtschneider, keynote address, 10.

familiarized with it and then relentlessly reminded of its salient points. Perhaps Fred would enlist, *inter alia*, Reverend Holtschneider in the campaign of steady reminders to the Mayor, until, as the Mayor eventually must, he reconsiders and, one hopes sooner than later, signs, rather than vetoes, living wage legislation for the City of Chicago. For, as President Holtschneider expressly stated in his keynote address: "Today, in the United States we have a new type of poverty where people work full-time jobs at Walmart... and still can't afford housing, food and health care all at the same time, and so must choose among the three — not to mention having nothing to set aside for retirement or a rainy day. We have among us now something called 'The Working Poor.'"<sup>11</sup>

Ozanam would undoubtedly ask, rhetorically, what can be done about it? For starters, the Mayor of Chicago, an alumnus of DePaul, should sign, sooner than later, renewed living wage legislation into law.

## V.

Today, in the fall of 2006, Blessed Fred would end as he began — in prayer. As President Holtschneider summarized in his address to the Society: "Take your rule seriously. All the parts of it. But especially the parts that call you to pray and grow closer to Christ. This Rule is a great gift precisely because it keeps you from becoming mere social-workers. You are followers of Christ. And this Rule is your Way."<sup>12</sup>

## EPILOGUE, 15 August 2009

As this Epilogue is written on the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary into heaven, what is new since my Saint Vincent de Paul lecture of 2006?

Well, everything; and, nothing. First, some long-overdue good news: After a decade of pointless delay, Congress finally passed legislation increasing the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.25 per hour effective 24 July 2009. Alas, that is about it for the good news. In the Great Recession of the past several years, massive job losses measure in the multimillions; consequently, a modest increase in the federal minimum wage remains an entirely moot point for those without work. And, today's minimum wage worker probably finds the \$7.25 per hour as proportionately inadequate as was the previous \$5.15 per hour of 1997-2007. Sadly, Chicago, like most of

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

the other major cities in the nation, still does not have a living wage law.

So much for the secular good, and bad, news. There is always the real Good News of the Gospel.

Jesus reminds us that he “makes all things new.” The work of Saint Vincent de Paul, indeed, the work of every Christian, of every Saint, is to make the timeless timely — at the macro level, to bring the world closer to Christ and to bring Christ closer to the world. At the micro level, one must first and always draw ever-nearer to Christ.

DePaul University is doing this in very tangible ways. In March, 2009, I had the pleasure of introducing a dozen DePaul undergraduates to the New York City Maryhouse Catholic Worker. They had spent their spring break week in an urban poverty immersion ministry experience here in the city. After a Friday evening dinner at Veselka, a landmark Ukrainian restaurant in the East Greenwich Village of lower Manhattan, we visited the Maryhouse Catholic Worker on East Third Street and participated in “for the clarification of thought,” as titled by Peter Maurin, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker. The evening closed with a visit to the Maryhouse rooms where Dorothy Day spent the last decade of her life, and where she died on 8 November 1980.



The New York City Maryhouse Catholic Worker house.

Begun as a part of the Catholic Worker Movement founded in part by Dorothy Day, it functions as a House of Hospitality providing assistance to those in need.

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On a personal note, my only child, David, entered Georgetown University one month before my Saint Vincent de Paul lecture at DePaul University. He spent the summer of 2008 working with the Jesuits in the slums and prisons of Manila, and, on this Feast of the Assumption in mid-August, 2009, is in the midst of his application to enter the novitiate of the Society of Jesus in August of 2010, upon graduating from Georgetown. In



very personal terms, the past three years since 2006 have renewed in me a deeper appreciation for the idealism, zeal, joy, and exhilaration of the young — reminding me vividly that Blessed Fred and his fellow Catholic collegians began carrying wood to the desperately poor of the Parisian tenements, humble acts of personal one-to-one charity which sparked the dramatically rapid spread of the St. Vincent de Paul Society across Europe.

In that spirit of zeal and ideal, St. John's University has inaugurated the Ozanam scholarships for undergraduate scholars especially committed to social justice apostolates. The program provides integrated studies and opportunities for reflection and prayer about the Vincentian charism and spirituality directly implicated through emulating Ozanam in metro New York in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Yes, but, what else has transpired since September, 2006?

Chicago has given President Barack Obama to the nation and the world, a momentous event of international historical importance. A former Community Organizer, President Obama was trained, in part, by the tenets of Chicagoan Saul Alinsky's *Reville for Radicals*, but also, in part, by the great Catholic social justice spirit of Monsignor Jack Egan, who served for many years as an advisor to DePaul's senior administration.

Our President is surely not without controversy. Consider his speeches at the University of Notre Dame and Georgetown University in April, 2009. But, he also has met with Francis Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago, and Pope Benedict XVI. Would Saint Vincent have met with President Obama? Would Ozanam? I venture to say yes, in both instances.

Saint Vincent and Blessed Fred lived "the preferential option for the poor" before it became a familiar part of the social theology discourse post-Vatican II. They would be most intrigued by the possibility of universal health care, at the heart of much of the 25<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew — what are our corporal works of mercy toward the least amongst us? What might Blessed Fred bring to the conversation with President Obama, Christian to Christian, but also brilliant law professor to brilliant law professor? Perhaps, just perhaps, the insights of Ozanam could lead to expansion of health care, especially for the least amongst us, without funding the horror of abortion. As Cardinal Rigali and the Bishops have most recently emphasized, national health care that presumes to facilitate abortion is a complete contradiction in terms, especially and exquisitely for the least amongst us — those about to be aborted. Pope Benedict XVI has electrified the world with his mystic's Jesus of Nazareth, a profoundly deep meditation. And, of course, Benedict XVI has issued three wonderful encyclicals, most recently, on the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul, 29 June 2009, *Caritas in Veritate*.

In what may soon be regarded as the greatest of the encyclicals on

the rights of workers and labor unions — and in the spirit of regard for the least amongst us given the overarching theme of the Church's preferential option for the poor — *Caritas in Veritate* reflects deep Vincentian themes. Saint Vincent, Blessed Fred, Monsignor Jack Egan, Cardinal George, and, yes, I venture to say, President Obama, would find immediate common ground in Pope Benedict's luminous encyclical. In paragraphs 63 and 64, the Pope summarizes: "No consideration of the problems associated with development could fail to highlight the direct link between poverty and unemployment. In many cases, poverty results from a violation of the dignity of human work... it is appropriate to recall how important it is that labor unions — which have always been encouraged and supported by the Church — should be open to the new perspectives that are emerging in the world of work... I am thinking, for example, of the complex of issues that social scientists describe in terms of a conflict between worker and consumer. Without necessarily endorsing the thesis that the central focus of the worker has given way to a central focus on the consumer, this would still appear to constitute new ground for unions to explore creatively."<sup>13</sup>

The plagues of materialism and consumerism must be met and mastered. Labor unions and workers share the world as fellow consumers of necessary goods, and are challenged by the Pope to creatively seek opportunities to better serve the common good, and to always do so with the focus on the corporal works of mercy towards the least amongst us.

So, in mid-August, 2009, the answer to the question "What would Ozanam Do?" remains: pray; first, and last, and throughout; I am convinced, he would pray. And, beginning with the first great Labor encyclical that he, at least in part, inspired decades earlier by his searching intellectual life and groundbreaking work on the natural salary, precursor to the living wage, Blessed Fred today would bring to bear in his work as a Catholic law professor and lawyer all of the Labor encyclicals, from Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* to, especially, Pope Benedict's most recent *Caritas in Veritate*.

Sooner than later, the labor unions, the workers, and, yes, the consumers of Chicago should remobilize and resume the imperative work of protecting and creating decent jobs while fostering the common good, and resisting the depredations of rank materialism. Enactment of a genuine living wage is an indispensable step in the correct direction.

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<sup>13</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009). Complete text available online at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html).